COURAGE
December 16, 2007

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Psalm 146
Isaiah 35:1–10

"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!'"
Isaiah 35:3–4 (NRSV)

The most disturbing quality of the baby Jesus, the mystery of his advent that scandalizes even as it inexorably beckons, is the vulnerability of his incarnation.
Nothing is so helpless, so dependent, so fragile, so frail, as a baby.
I know of no other religion so bold as to admit to the possibility of its God appearing in so vulnerable a form. How scandalously condescending is the love of God who deems to meet us first as a baby. How threatening is this God to my human desire for an aloof, Platonic deity who lives in the realm
of the abstract, self-contained ideal, rather than in the stable out back, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

William H. Willimon
"Unto Us a Child"
On a Wild and Windy Mountain

It is an old and honorable tradition that on one of the Advent Sundays near Christmas, churches turn the agenda over to the choir and musicians. There are several reasons for this. For one there is a lot of great Christmas music: Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, Vivaldi's *Gloria*. We will hear one of the modern classics this morning: Benjamin Britten's setting of several ancient Christmas songs, *A Ceremony of Carols.* The popular and beloved carols themselves—"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie . . . The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight"—there's more of Christmas in that one phrase than you'll find in any other medium, including sermons. And that is the second reason for Cantata Sunday in many churches. Preachers know their own limits at Christmas. The incarnation, the coming of God into human history, the enfleshment of the holy, simply does not easily fit into words. Every year, as I turn to the task I am both comforted and reassured by something the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said a generation ago. At Christmastime, Niebuhr and his

wife always attended a “High Church,” where music and liturgy play a major role, rather than preaching. No preacher, Niebuhr said, is up to the incarnation. Better to turn things over to the musicians.

So that is what we will do this morning, happily—after I have my say, however.

The subject this morning is courage—and fear. The text is the beautiful poetry of the prophet Isaiah, written centuries before the birth of Jesus:

> Strengthen the weak hands,
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> “Be strong, do not fear!
> Here is your God.”

And a second supporting text: the sixth of the carol in Benjamin Britten’s *Ceremony*, a far-more-eloquent expression than you will hear from the pulpit:

> This little babe, so few days old
> Is come to rifle Satan’s fold.
> All hell doth at his presence quake,
> though he himself for cold doth shake.

I love that image of hell quaking at the presence of a shivering baby.

On the topic of fear, Peter Gomes remembers a recent transatlantic flight from Boston to London, where he was to preach at an Anglican church the next morning. Midway across the Atlantic, the plane encountered significant turbulence. The pilot came on the intercom asking everyone to return to their seats and fasten seat belts as the plane lunged and bounced and rocked. Peter said he was less nervous about the turbulence than he was about the next morning’s preaching assignment, so he took out his Bible and notes and went to work. The woman in the seat next to him, who had been mercifully silent throughout the flight thus far, looked at him and, as the turbulence increased, looked at his Bible and finally asked nervously, “Do you know something I should know?”

Well, yes. If you read even a little bit of the Bible, you will discover that, as a matter of fact, it has quite a bit to say about fear—or rather about not being afraid. “Fear not,” the Bible says from cover to cover. “Do not be afraid.” It is there at the beginning and the end of the story of Jesus. When the shepherds were watching their flocks in the dead of night and the sky suddenly shone and shimmered and an angel of the Lord appeared, they were “sore afraid,” the old King James Version put it. I loved that “sore

afraid" business. I used to think it meant they were so afraid they were sore from shivering. And the first thing the angel said is "Fear not. Do not be afraid, for I bring you great tidings of good news for all people."

Jesus, it seems, is constantly encouraging his disciples not to live by their fear. When he decides to go to Jerusalem, they're afraid and beg him not to go. When he is arrested, they all flee in fear. After his crucifixion, they cower in fear in a locked room. And when a few of them venture to the place of burial early on Sunday morning and find the tomb empty, again the words come to them: "Fear not. Do not be afraid."

Old Testament scholar Charles Cousar says that the Bible is relentless in its conviction that when God comes there will be a radical transformation: creation will be reorganized and reordered. There will be peace—peace among the nations, peace between old enemies, peace in every human heart. And there will be nothing to fear.

The prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before Jesus, addresses a nation that is frightened and for very good reason. Judah is small, weak, and vulnerable in the face of the great and threatening armies of the Assyrian Empire. The future could not look more grim. There are a lot of shaking hands and weak knees in Judah. "Strengthen the weak hands," the prophet exhorts. "Make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'"

The Bible has so much to say about fear because fear is such an enemy of life. It's hard to love when you're afraid. It's hard to care passionately when you are afraid. It's impossible to be joyful when you're frightened. There is a sense in which fear limits life, constrains life, is the antithesis of life.

Peter Steinke wrote an article for the *Christian Century* earlier this year, "The Fear Factor," and explained how fear works. "Fear," he says, "is a wake-up call. It arouses awareness of danger. It puts us on high alert." As such, fear can be a good thing: a built-in safety mechanism that enables us to avoid danger. It's a good thing to be afraid sometimes. Fear sets off an amazing sequence of physiological responses: eyes widen and pupils dilate to see more; breath quickens, pumping more oxygen to our bodies; hair raises; we're on high alert, ready for "fight or flight." But there is a point, Steinke argues, "when fear overwhelms us and actually diminishes our alertness. With extreme fear, adrenalin floods the body, producing intense vigilance, riveting the brain on the object of the fear. Now the fearful person is barely able to focus on anything else. Tunnel vision occurs and fear takes over" ("Fear Factor," *Christian Century,* 20 February 2007).

That is not good.

Some people think something like that tunnel vision and fear taking over has happened to us as a nation. Peter Gomes says the first reaction to the tragedy of 9/11 was disbelief —"This can't be happening"—and the second was fear. Maybe it could happen again, maybe to us. But the greater tragedy, Gomes wrote recently, "greater than the loss of buildings and human lives, is that we have been since programmed to live by our fears and not by our hopes" (*The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p. 104).

We have learned to take necessary precautions in airports. And sometimes we forget and act like we used to be able to act back in the age of innocence. In my carry-on luggage recently was a jar of jam, not just any old jam, but homemade strawberry jam, a gift for my son in California, his favorite. Of course, the X-ray picked up the ominous-appearing container of suspicious viscous material. The Transportation Security Administration staff person opened my carry-on, retrieved the offending jar, and said, "Sorry, sir. This can't go on." "It's strawberry jam," I responded. "Sorry, sir." "But it's just jam; would you like to taste it? It's for my son. I made it for him." "Sorry, sir." After several more pleas, I realized I was not going to win this one and said, "I tell you what. You take it. You and your family will love it. And I'll know someone is enjoying my jam." "Sorry, sir. We're not allowed to do that." "What will you do with it?" I asked. "I have to discard it. Do I have your permission to do that now?" she asked. "What are my alternatives?" "You can go back through security and check your bag at the counter," she announced. That wasn't an alternative. And so I stood there and watched my strawberry jam disappear into the abyss of hairspray, perfume, shaving lotion, water bottles—a symbol of our national vigilance . . . . and our fear.

Robert Frost once said, "There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people." And Thomas Friedman wrote a column last September, "9/11 Is Over," in which he said, "9/11 has made us stupid. I honor and weep for all those murdered that day. But our reaction to 9/11, mine included, has knocked America completely off balance and it is time to get things right again. . . . In the wake of 9/11 we need new precaution. But we also need our old habits and sense of openness. We have been exporting not hope, but fear."

In our fear we have done and are doing things we abhor in our enemies. The prison at Guantanamo—where people are held out of the reach of our judicial system, many of them without having been charged, no habeas corpus—is a sorry stain on our national reputation. We are doing things to prisoners, Senator John McCain said recently, and refusing to call it torture, for which we tried Japanese military officers for war crimes.

Father Andrew Greely said recently that forcing us to abandon our core values as a nation, "9/11 succeeded beyond the expectations of the vile murderers" who did it.

In a dangerous world, how shall we live then? Perhaps the words of Isaiah from across the centuries are a way:

> Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those of a fearful heart,
> “Be strong, do not fear!
> Here is your God.”

God’s coming, the prophet proclaims, changes things. There is nothing to fear. That is the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem means that ultimate issues have been resolved. The coming of the Christ into human history, to live our life, to die our death, to defeat the power of death in his resurrection, means that there is nothing to fear. The final battle has been won.

That is what we mean when in the Creed we say that Jesus Christ was “dead, buried, and descended into hell.” Jesus went to hell for us. Jesus faced the worst that can happen to us, to our dear ones, and the battle is over. There is nothing to fear.

And that is what the ancient carol means: “This little babe so few days old is come to rifle Satan’s fold. All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake.”

Studies have shown that the part of the brain that controls and manages fear responds powerfully to “calm words, faces, and gentle touch.” Human presence and human voices are resources when we are afraid (see Steinke, *Christian Century*, 20 February 2007).

A little girl, three years old, was frightened by a fierce thunderstorm. Huddled in her bed as the lightning crashed, she called out in fear. Her mother appeared, took the child in her arms and said, “Don’t be afraid. Everything will be alright. God will take care of you.”

“I know,” the little girl said, “but I want someone with skin.”

The people who told that story to me, good friends, remembered when they put their daughter to bed at night, years ago, said bedtime prayers, tucked her in, kissed her and said goodnight. For years, she said as they left her room, “Make sounds.” She wanted the security of her parents’ presence, the comforting sounds of their voices, dishes being dried, the television set, the human sounds of home and safety and love.

In Jesus Christ, God comes close, in human skin, if you will, and a human voice.

Beyond the beauty of the human story of Christmas, Christians believe something cosmic has happened. Things are different now. Evil and suffering and death have been put in their place.

Love and compassion and peace and hope are now the new realities by which God's kingdom lives on earth—and in our hearts and our lives.

Ministers are privileged to witness it in the daily lives of people who decide to live in hopeful courage.

> I see it in the faces of the men and women standing in the cold at 7:00 a.m., waiting for the church to open to go to an AA meeting, deciding daily to live another day of hopeful sobriety.
>
> I see it in the eyes of the young parents of a handicapped child, determined to live with hope and possibility instead of despair.
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> I see it when ninety-year-olds put on their Sunday best and, as they have done every Sunday for nine decades, go to church, walk to church in all kinds of weather, to be part of God's faithful people, to be reminded and to bear witness to the fact that the world is different now.
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> I see it when the test comes back positive and a brave man or woman makes a difficult decision about treatment and then bravely decides to live every minute of life, every day.
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> I see it when at the funeral we say, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live" and a grieving spouse faces a new and completely unexpected future (suggested by David Davis, *A Kingdom You Can Taste*, p. 18).

There are, and will be, times for every one of us when we will have, in the prophet's striking description, "weak hands and feeble knees," times when we are afraid.

And across the years come the words:

> Be strong. Do not fear.
> Here is your God.

Here in Bethlehem is the child who is coming. Here is your God.

> O little town of Bethlehem,
> how still we see thee lie!
> Above thy deep and dreamless sleep

the silent stars go by.
Yet in the dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

Amen.